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## Theistic Relational Spirituality: Development, Dynamics, Health, and Transformation

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### Abstract

Most of the world's population identify as religious or spiritual, and most religiously affiliated believers identify with one of the world's major monotheistic traditions: Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. Within each of these traditions, especially Christianity, one important aspect of many believers' religion/spirituality is how they view and relate with God. The purpose of this paper is to describe a model of theistic relational spirituality (i.e., the ways monotheistic believers view and relate with God) that integrates theory and research from the fields of psychology, attachment, social cognition, and interpersonal neurobiology. We argue that theistic relational spirituality is comprised of two main types of God representations: doctrinal (primarily explicit and affect-light) and experiential (primarily implicit and affect-laden) representations. From an attachment perspective, we discuss the development and dynamics (e.g., context-dependence) of these God representations. We propose that doctrinal–experiential congruence forms the basis of a healthy theistic relational spirituality, when it is contextually adaptive, consistent across time and situations, and aligned with the theistic believer's behaviors. We also delineate potentially adaptive transformation of less healthy forms of theistic relational spirituality. Lastly, we discuss ways in which this model of theistic relational spirituality might direct future research.

*Key words: God representations, religion, spirituality, attachment, health*



### Theistic Relational Spirituality: Development, Dynamics, Health, and Transformation

Across the globe, 84% of people are religiously affiliated, and the majority of religious believers identify with one of the three main monotheistic traditions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Christians represent the majority religion in North America (77%), South America (90%), Europe (75%), and sub-Saharan Africa (63%); Muslims represent the majority religion in the Middle East and North Africa (93%); and Jews represent the majority religion in the country of Israel (76%; Pew Research Center, 2012). Within each of these traditions, especially Christianity, one important aspect of many believers' religion/spirituality is how they view and relate with God (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to present an integrative model for understanding *theistic relational spirituality*—that is, the ways monotheistic believers conceptually view and experientially relate with God (Davis et al., 2016). This model synthesizes theory and research from the fields of psychology, attachment, social cognition, and interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB). We draw on the distinction between theistic<sup>1</sup> believers' doctrinal<sup>2</sup> and experiential representations of God (Davis, Moriarty, & Mauch, 2013; Zahl & Gibson, 2012). Ultimately, building on Pargament's (2007, 2013) claim that a healthy spirituality is characterized by a high degree of integration (i.e., congruence, coherence, and synchrony) among its ingredients, we argue that a healthy theistic relational spirituality is characterized by a high degree of integration between a theistic believer's doctrinal and experiential representations of God, but only when such integration is (a) contextually adaptive (i.e., is able to meet challenges one faces and is associated with culturally valued and situationally appropriate indicators of health/well-being), (b) consistent across time and situations, and (c) aligned with the believer's behaviors (cf. Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012; MacDonald, 2017, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2015).

This paper contains six main sections. In the first section, we introduce our conceptual points of departure for understanding theistic relational spirituality, and we define its underlying dimensions in terms of doctrinal and experiential representations of God. In the second section, we discuss the developmental foundations of these representations. The third section deals with the dynamics of theistic relational spirituality, and the fourth section deals with theistic relational spirituality and health/well-being. In the fifth section, we discuss theistic relational spirituality and the possibility of adaptive transformation of doctrinal and experiential representations of God. In the last section, we conclude and suggest avenues for future research.

### **Conceptual Points of Departure**

There is a growing scientific literature on relational spirituality, and it is characterized by a broad array of conceptualizations and theoretical influences (Davis et al., 2013; 2016; Tomlinson, Glenn, Paine, & Sandage, 2016). Tomlinson et al. (2016) reviewed this literature and identified five distinct but overlapping contexts within which relational spirituality tends to be conceptualized: “(a) cognitive appraisals of stress and coping; (b) implicit relational development; (c) couples, family, and community contexts; (d) social interconnection; and (e) a differentiation-based model of spiritual development” (p. 55). In this paper, we present a theistic relational spirituality model that can be situated particularly (but not exclusively) within the “implicit relational development” stream of this relational spirituality literature, given that our model builds on concepts from (a) attachment theory (which focuses on the role of close relationships in people’s development and functioning throughout the life course; see Bowlby, 1969, 1973), (b) dual-process theories of social cognition (which focus on the two distinct categories of mental processes—automatic and nonautomatic—that underlie social phenomena; see Sherman, Gawronski, & Trope, 2014), and (c) IPNB theory (which focuses on the role of the

mind, brain, and relationships in human development, functioning, and health/well-being; see Cozolino, 2017; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b). These theories are emphasized heavily in the “implicit relational development” stream of the relational spirituality literature (Tomlinson et al., 2016).

Attachment and dual-process theories may be quite familiar to most readers, whereas the field of IPNB may not be quite as familiar. Hence, in what follows, we introduce the IPNB framework, as it provides an overarching framework for conceptualizing humans’ relational mind/brain. We adopt an IPNB framework as the core conceptual foundation for our theistic relational spirituality model, because IPNB (a) is an interdisciplinary and integrative framework that builds on a wide variety of conceptually and empirically supported theories (including attachment and dual-process theories); (b) provides a framework for understanding the links among people’s mind, brain, and relationships; and (c) offers a framework for explaining how the reciprocal interactions of mind, brain, and relationships are linked to health/well-being.

### **An IPNB Framework for Conceptualizing Humans’ Relational Mind/Brain**

From an IPNB perspective, humans are psychophysical beings who are comprised of two distinct, interdependent facets (mind and brain) and whose experiences involve the dynamic, reciprocal interaction of three primes (i.e., irreducible aspects): mind, brain, and relationships (Siegel, 2012a, 2012b). These facets are metaphorically illustrated in Siegel’s (2012a) *triangle of human experience* (p. 414), which conceptualizes human experience as emerging from the bidirectional interaction of (a) the *mind* (“the embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information,” Siegel, 2010, p. 121), (b) the *brain* (“the mechanism of energy and information flow throughout the extended nervous system distributed throughout the entire body,” Siegel, 2010, p. 121), and (c) *relationships* (“how energy and information are shared as

[humans] connect and communicate with one another,” Siegel, 2010, p. 261, and, we hasten to add, as humans engage in perceived<sup>3</sup> experiences with divine relational beings such as God).

Siegel (2012a, 2012b) takes this triangle of human experience a step further in IPNB’s *triangle of well-being*, which metaphorically depicts what constitutes a healthy mind, brain, and relationships. From an IPNB perspective, *health/well-being* is defined as “a state of optimal regulation and adaptive functioning of body, mind, and relationships” (Siegel, 2012a, p. 459) and is viewed as emerging from *integration* (i.e., “the linkage of differentiated elements,” Siegel, 2012a, p. 27). Specifically, health/well-being is understood as emerging “from a balanced and coordinated brain, empathic and connected relationships, and coherent and resilient mind” (Siegel, 2012a, p. 28). Notably, IPNB’s definition of health/well-being is resonant with modern, empirically based conceptualizations of health/well-being as a single, higher-order construct that can be delineated into lower-order domains of functioning (e.g., psychological, physical, social, and spiritual; MacDonald, 2017, 2018). It also is resonant with contemporary scientific definitions of health/well-being, such as the one proposed by Dodge and colleagues (2012):

[Health/well-being refers to] the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced.... In essence, stable [health/well-being] is when individuals have the psychological, social,... physical [and/or spiritual] resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social,... physical [and/or spiritual] challenge. (p. 230)

To synthesize theory and research on theistic relational spirituality and well-being, we adopt the conceptual framework espoused in IPNB’s triangles of human experience and well-being (Siegel, 2010, 2012a, 2012b). Therefore, in discussing theistic relational spirituality, we are referring to the dynamic and bidirectional interaction among a theistic believer’s mind, brain, and relationships, with respect to how that believer views and relates to God. Furthermore, in

discussing a *healthy theistic relational spirituality*, we are referring to a theistic relational spirituality that both fosters and reflects contextually adaptive functioning and integration between a believer's doctrinal and experiential representations of God (Davis et al., 2013; Rizzuto, 1979; Watts & Dumbreck, 2013). In this way, we affirm that healthy theistic relational spirituality can be both a cause (i.e., mechanism) and effect (i.e., outcome; MacDonald, 2018).

### **Defining Doctrinal and Experiential Representations of God**

Building on this IPNB framework, we posit that monotheistic believers have two main types of *God representations* (i.e., mental/neural representations of God in a monotheistic believer's mind/brain): *doctrinal representations* and *experiential representations* (Davis et al., 2013, 2016; cf. Rizzuto, 1979; Watts & Dumbreck, 2013). These two types of God representations can be metaphorically thought of as the two mental/neural “train tracks” underlying how a monotheistic believer conceptually views and experientially relates to God, respectively (see Figure 1). See Davis et al. (2013), Siegel (2012a, 2012b), Cozolino (2017), and Sherman et al. (2014), for reviews of the theories and research underlying this conceptualization.

Importantly, *mental representations* refer to “cognitive structures that reflect acquired knowledge and experience, and that provide the material on which cognitive processes operate” (Carlston, 2010, p. 39), and *neural representations* refer to “a pattern of neural firing that represents something, such as a memory, bodily sensation, or perception” (Siegel, 2012a, p. 479). In the rest of this paper, we often refer collectively to mental and neural representations, because the mind and brain represent two interrelated sides of human experience (Siegel, 2012a).

Doctrinal representations of God (also called *God concepts* or “*head knowledge*”) are the God representations that mentally/neurally underlie the ways monotheistic believers conceptually view God. They mentally/neurally represent believers' conceptual knowledge



about God, particularly their doctrinal beliefs about God's traits and ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving toward humans. Doctrinal representations guide and integrate how a believer thinks and talks about God at an abstract, theological, conceptual, declarative, and often explicit level (e.g., within conscious awareness). As such, these representations tend to be cognitively oriented (e.g., affect-light, cortically dominant neural networks) and mediated primarily by semantic memory. In terms of dual-process theories of social cognition, doctrinal representations mainly involve:

- left-mode, cortical neural circuitry;
- the rational information-processing system ("cold cognitive," "Type 2," "C" system);
- "explicit" mental contents and processes that are currently accessible to conscious awareness;
- reflective, slow, controlled, self-driven, and analytic mental processes;
- sequential processing; and
- verbal-symbolic processes (see Davis et al., 2013; Rizzuto, 1979; Sharp et al., 2018; Zahl, Sharp, & Gibson, 2013).

In contrast, experiential representations of God (also called *God images* or "*heart knowledge*") are the God representations that mentally/neurally underlie the ways monotheistic believers experientially relate with God. They are the affective and behavioral representations that underlie believers' embodied, emotional experience in perceived relationship with God. In particular, they consist of a believer's largely unconscious internal working models (IWMs) of God in relation to self (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Experiential representations guide and integrate how believers experience and relate with God at an emotional, physiological, largely nonverbal, episodic, procedural, and often implicit level (i.e., outside conscious awareness).

Whereas doctrinal representations of God tend to be more cognitively oriented (i.e., cortically dominant, affect-light), experiential representations of God tend to be more affectively oriented (i.e., subcortically dominant, affect-laden). Experiential representations are context-sensitive, affect-laden mental/neural representations that are mediated primarily by episodic and procedural memory, especially generalized event representations. In terms of dual-process theories of social cognition, experiential representations mainly involve:

- right-mode, frontal-subcortical neural circuitry;
- the experiential information-processing system (“hot emotional,” “Type 1,” “X” system);
- “implicit” or unconscious and preconscious mental contents and processes;
- reflexive, fast, automatic, stimulus-driven, and holistic mental processes;
- parallel distributed processing; and
- subsymbolic and nonverbal-symbolic processes (Davis et al., 2013; Hall & Fujikawa, 2013; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Rizzuto, 1979; Sharp et al., 2018).

Before proceeding, it is noteworthy that the distinctions between doctrinal and experiential representations of God are not as clear-cut as the aforementioned conceptual contrasts might suggest. These contrasts represent prototypes and are intended to highlight the predominant features associated with doctrinal and experiential representations of God, respectively. Nonetheless, we recognize each of these two modes of religious cognition involves

- left-mode, right-mode, cortical, and subcortical neural circuitry;
- the rational and experiential information processing systems;
- explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious or preconscious) mental contents and processes;

- reflective and reflexive, slow and fast, controlled and automatic, self-driven and stimulus-driven, and analytic and holistic mental processes;
- sequential and parallel distributed processing; and
- verbal-symbolic, nonverbal-symbolic, and subsymbolic processes.

Furthermore, we argue that doctrinal and experiential representations are two modes of religious cognition that operate simultaneously and interactively with one another (Davis et al., 2013).

It is also notable that doctrinal representations can at times be quite affect-laden (e.g., theological beliefs about God's feelings regarding horrific injustices). Likewise, experiential representations can at times be quite affect-light (e.g., routinely relating to God in an emotionally guarded or detached manner). Again, these conceptual contrasts are merely meant to highlight the predominant features and processes associated with each type of God representation.

### **Key Cultural Considerations Regarding Theistic Relational Spirituality**

Before proceeding, it is important to highlight some key cultural considerations regarding theistic relational spirituality. First of all, the lion's share of the scholarly literature on theistic relational spirituality has focused on Christian religiousness/spirituality and has used predominantly Christian samples (Tomlinson et al., 2016), even though some social scientists (e.g., Bonab, Miner, & Proctor, 2013; Ghorbani, Watson, Geranmayepour, & Chen, 2014; Ghorbani, Watson, Omidbeiki, & Chen, 2016; Miner, Ghobary, Dowson, & Proctor, 2014) and religious scholars (e.g., Ibn Arabi, 2004; Nasr, 1997) have explored theistic relational spirituality within the Muslim tradition, and other social scientists (e.g., Krumrei, Pirutinsky, & Rosmarin, 2013; Rosmarin, Pargament, Krumrei, & Flannelly, 2009; Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Pargament, & Krumrei, 2009; Silverman, Johnson, & Cohen, 2016) and religious scholars (e.g., Cohon, 1931/2005; Green, 1989; Ibn Paqda, 1040/1996) have explored it within the Jewish tradition.

Part of this scarcity of scholarly inquiry into the theistic relational spirituality of Muslims and Jews may be due to the dearth of measurement tools that have been developed and validated for assessing Muslim and Jewish religiousness and spirituality (Abu-Raiya & Hill, 2014; Rosmarin, Pargament, & Krumrei, 2009). Another reason may be that Muslims and Jews might be less likely to believe Allah or God is a personal, nonmediated, and interactive god. For example, in the nationally representative 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, the Pew Research Center (2015) found that 89% of adult Americans believe in God, with 57% of Americans indicating they believe God is “a person with whom people can have a relationship” (p. 50), 26% indicating they believe God is an impersonal force, and 6% indicating they hold some other conception of God. Their findings suggest that, among religiously affiliated adults in the U.S., Christians are most likely to believe in a personal God (70%), compared to 32% of Muslims, 32% of Hindus, 25% of Jews, and 23% of Buddhists. Conversely, only 22% of Christians believe God is an impersonal force, compared to 53% of Muslims, 49% of Hindus, 45% of Jews, and 42% of Buddhists (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Furthermore, it is notable that Judaism and Islam tend to focus more on religious/spiritual practices (e.g., behaviors and experiences) than on religious/spiritual beliefs (e.g., doctrinal representations of God; Cohen, Gorvine, & Gorvine, 2013; Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin, 2003; Esposito, 1998), whereas religious/spiritual beliefs and religious/spiritual practices are central dimensions of Christian religiousness/spirituality (Beck & Haugen, 2013). Moreover, evidence suggests that Christian religiousness/spirituality tends to be more individualistic (e.g., focusing on personal beliefs, goals, and experiences), whereas Jewish religiousness/spirituality tends to be more collectivistic (e.g., focusing on communal identity, goals, and practices; Cohen et al., 2013; Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005; Cohen & Hill, 2007), and Muslim

religiousness/spirituality may tend to involve a blend of the two (Abu-Raiya, 2013; Fischer, Ai, Aydin, Frey, & Haslam, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2017; Saraglou & Cohen, 2013). In addition, believers' personal relationship with God is often a central aspect of Christian religiousness/spirituality (Beck & Haugen, 2013), whereas it may be less so in Jewish and Muslim religiousness/spirituality (Glaser, 1986; Silverman et al., 2016; cf. Miner et al., 2014).

Taken together, the theistic relational framework presented herein may apply directly to a higher percentage of Christians. By comparison, we are much more tentative in its applications and generalizability to believers from other monotheistic traditions. Even so, we argue this framework may be applicable to any monotheistic believer who believes in a personal God with whom they have a perceived relationship, regardless of that believer's faith tradition.

### **Developmental Foundations of Theistic Relational Spirituality**

Naturally, theistic relational spirituality builds on developmental foundations, which can be understood as the acquisition of believers' characteristically "biased cognitive and affective propensities to infuse the unobserved [e.g., God] with intentionality, agency, and relational and affective features" (Granqvist & Nkara, 2017, p. 8). In explaining these developmental foundations, scholars of various theoretical persuasions have tended to emphasize either the influences of nature (e.g., genetic predispositions; cognitive modules) or of nurture (e.g., social learning; interaction history with caregivers). Yet from an IPNB view, this type of nature–nurture dichotomy is simply unserviceable. Instead, down to the most basic level, human development—including the development of theistic relational spirituality—inherently involves extensive nature–nurture interactions (Granqvist & Nkara, 2017; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b). In what follows, we mostly discuss nurture influences, but it should be understood that nurture influences interact with nature ones (e.g., the biological predispositions underlying the attachment system)

in the development of theistic relational spirituality, including its representational elements.

Toward that end, IPNB provides a helpful framework for understanding how theistic believers'

God representations (mind/brain) are developed within the context of their relationships.

### **The Development of Doctrinal Representations of God**

Theistic believers' doctrinal representations of God are developed primarily through socialization and sociocultural learning experiences (see Granqvist & Nkara, 2017; Moriarty & Davis, 2012; Rizzuto, 1979; cf. Richert & Granqvist, 2013). Such experiences include instruction from, modeling by, and conversations with caregivers, teachers, friends, romantic partners, peers, fellow believers, and religious and cultural leaders. Other learning experiences are also quite influential, including information conveyed explicitly or implicitly through literature, media, education, and culture. In addition, doctrinal representations of God may be developed and modified through theistic believers' individual experiences in perceived communication with God (e.g., via prayer, rituals, worship, religious texts, nature, etc.).

Although social and cultural learning experiences will vitally influence the informational content of a theistic believer's doctrinal representations of God, the believer's relational–affective experiences with caregivers and other models will place important constraints on whether specific informational content makes coherent psychological sense to him or her (and thus will influence the extent to which that informational content is transmitted fully). For example, a doctrinal message that “God is loving” will be more fully transmitted in a parent–child dyad in which there is a loving parent and a child who truly feels loved, because that informational content about God will—via generalizing internal working models—resonate coherently with the child's relational–affective experience of his or her parent. In contrast, if an authoritarian or rejecting parent tells a child “God is loving” but then recurrently treats the child

in a punitive, rejecting, or even traumatizing way, then this doctrinal information about God is unlikely to get transmitted fully, because—again via generalizing internal working models—it does not resonate coherently with the child’s relational–affective experience of the parent.

In a conceptually relevant discussion, Bowlby (1973) described how a child subjected to mixed messages from caregivers, such as declarative (cf. doctrinal) expressions of tenderness (“I love you”) coupled with procedural (cf. experiential) acts of consistent rejection, would only receive a sense of being loved at the conscious/propositional level; thus, the loving message would not be fully transmitted. Furthermore, given that young children often have difficulty distinguishing between appearances and reality, such mixed messages from caregivers and other models might contribute toward the child developing conflicting (incoherent) representations of God (e.g., doctrinal–experiential incongruence; cf. Granqvist & Main, 2017; Main, 1991).

### **The Development of Experiential Representations of God**

Theistic believers’ experiential representations of God are developed primarily through experiences in relationships with other humans (e.g., caregivers, friends, romantic partners, peers, fellow believers, and religious leaders) and in perceived relationship with God (e.g., via prayer, meditation, rituals, worship, nature, or other religious/spiritual practices and experiences). This understanding of how experiential representations of God develop is based on the attachment theory construct of *internal working models* (IWMs), which refers to experience-shaped mental/neural representations that guide how humans perceive and interact with others (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Bretherton & Munholland, 2016; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b), including God (Bonab et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2013; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Hall & Fujikawa, 2013; Hall et al., 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Miner et al., 2014). As Davis et al. (2013) have explained:

[IWMs] initially develop through early experiences with caregivers, but they remain open to revision across the life span, through subsequent interactions with attachment figures.... [IWMs] center on the fulfillment and regulation of attachment needs (e.g., maintaining proximity to a caring attachment figure, regulating attachment-related distress, and achieving felt security) and consist of two components (one referring to the attachment figure and the other to the self). The first component refers to whether the attachment figure is experienced as consistently available, sensitive, and responsive when needed; the second, to whether the self is experienced as worthy of love, acceptance, care, and esteem (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2004; Siegel, 2012b). (p. 53)

Regarding the development of experiential representations of God, abundant scientific findings suggest that the experience-shaped perceptual filters (IWMs) that guide how a theistic believer perceives and relates with God often correspond to the experience-shaped perceptual filters that guide how that person perceives and relates with other humans (Davis et al., 2013; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013, 2016; Hall & Fujikawa, 2013; Hall et al., 2009). Such findings support what is referred to as the *IWM correspondence hypothesis* (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005), which is depicted and explained in Figure 2.

Yet there also is considerable evidence that theistic believers with recurrent negatively valenced experiences in human relationships (e.g., insecure attachment patterns) may develop compensatory perceptual filters that guide how they perceive and relate with God, especially when distressed. For example, they may recurrently experience other humans as rejecting or insensitive, so they develop a compensatory relationship with God to help them cope with and navigate life. That is, believers who have had difficult (i.e., insecure) human relationships may come to perceive and relate with God as a surrogate attachment figure who helps regulate their



emotions and restore felt security (i.e., calmness and confidence). Ample research supports this *compensation hypothesis* (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005), which is depicted and explained in Figure 3.

Although the compensation hypothesis might seem to represent a deficiency-based conceptualization of theistic relational spirituality, insecure attachment patterns are actually thought to reflect a secondary attachment strategy that only develops following repeated failure to successfully implement a primary (i.e., secure) attachment strategy for obtaining sufficient care from the attachment figure (Main, 1991). Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2013) have explained:

The use of surrogate attachments may provide a unique opportunity to observe the presumed remnants of such a primary (or secure) attachment strategy. In other words, although the defensive layer (or filter) thought to characterize insecure attachment becomes automatized and habitual over the course of development, it may constitute a surface aspect of functioning that does not fully override the primary strategy. For example, deeply held wishes to be able to act and relate differently may remain. (p. 147)

Such deeply held wishes may be what is manifesting in the empirical evidence supporting the compensation hypothesis (e.g., people with insecure attachment histories often have sudden religious conversions, especially during times of loss or distress in their human relationships; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2003; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004, 2016). Additionally, drawing on the doctrinal versus experiential distinction described herein, compensation may happen when doctrinal representations of a benevolent deity become harnessed at the experiential level for compensatory purposes. For example, a previously nonreligious adult who has an insecure global attachment pattern may have been exposed to a lifetime of religious doctrine that God is loving, and in the midst of a relational crisis, he or she may begin engaging in religious practices (e.g., contemplative prayer) that help them cope by actually *feeling* loved by God for the first time.

### **Dynamics of Theistic Relational Spirituality**

IPNB also provides a conceptually and empirically rigorous framework for understanding the dynamics of theistic relational spirituality. In particular, IPNB acknowledges the mind and brain are profoundly sensitive to contextual influences. That is, the mind and brain are highly *context-dependent* in that, at any point in time, contextual factors heavily shape what is occurring in one's mind and brain (Coan, 2016; Mischel & Shoda, 2008; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b), thereby influencing how one is experiencing and relating to oneself, others, and God (Davis et al., 2013).

For instance, converging empirical evidence suggests adults do not just have one set of unitary mental/neural IWMs that underlie a single “attachment pattern.” Instead, adults seem to have a complex mental/neural network of hierarchically organized IWMs, consisting of (a) *global IWMs* (generalized from recurrent experiences in close relationships broadly), (b) *midlevel IWMs* (generalized from recurrent experiences in certain types of close relationships, such as friendships or romantic relationships), and (c) *relationship-specific IWMs* (generalized from recurrent experiences in certain relationships, such as with one's best friend or romantic partner). In turn, this mental/neural hierarchy of IWMs underlies a corresponding mental/neural hierarchy of *attachment patterns*—that is, a person's “patterns of expectations, needs, emotions, and social behavior that result from a particular history of attachment experiences” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, p. 23). *Global attachment patterns* refer to habitual responses in close relationships broadly, *midlevel attachment patterns* refer to habitual responses in certain types of close relationships, and *relationship-specific attachment patterns* refer to habitual responses in specific relationships (Baldwin et al., 1996; Collins et al., 2004; Cozzarelli, Hoekstra, & Bylsma, 2000; Crowell, Fraley, & Roisman, 2016; Davis et al., 2013; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003; Pierce & Lydon, 2001). Attachment patterns can

therefore be understood as context-dependent *habits* (i.e., “dispositions to give a response in a particular context,” Wood, Labrecque, Lin, & Ruenger, 2014, p. 371) that are learned or developed “when people repeat the same behavior in a specific context, so that associations between the behavior and the contextual cues can be formed” (Wood et al., 2014, p. 371). These distinctions are important partly because they help de-reify the notion that attachment patterns represent trait-like characteristics of individuals. Indeed, as Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) have documented, infants who behave avoidantly with their caregivers in the novel (for the infant) Strange Situation procedure do not in fact behave avoidantly in their familiar home situations, where they instead tend to behave in a highly clingy, fussy, and dependent manner.

Building on this understanding of IWMs, attachment patterns, and habits, it can be argued that theistic believers have a complex network of mental/neural representations that underlie how they view and relate with God, even as they have a complex network of mental/neural representations that underlie how they view and relate with other humans. In other words, the dynamics of theistic relational spirituality are profoundly context-dependent, even as attachment dynamics are more generally (Davis et al., 2013; Sharp, Rentfrow, & Gibson, 2017). Thus, in a specific time and situation, the ways a theistic believer conceptually views and experientially relates to God will be shaped heavily by the presence of certain learned internal contextual cues (e.g., current feelings, thoughts, motivations, and bodily sensations) and external contextual cues (e.g., features of the broader sociocultural context and the immediate situational context, such as where one is, when it is, and who else is there; Davis et al., 2013; cf. Mischel & Shoda, 2008; Wood et al., 2014). For example, a theistic believer might have a negatively valenced God representation that habitually gets mentally/neurally activated when he or she feels guilty over a

perceived moral failure but might have a positively valenced God representation that habitually gets activated when he or she feels grateful for a perceived blessing (Davis et al., 2013).

In short, theistic believers may have qualitatively different and even multiple doctrinal and experiential God representations that get mentally/neurally activated based on the presence of certain learned internal and external contextual cues. The presence of particular internal and external contextual cues leads specific mental/neural representations (IWMs) of self, others, and God to get mentally/neurally activated (i.e., brought “online” in the person’s mind and brain), based on previously learned pairings. Over time, certain contextual cues become associated with the activation of certain IWMs, thereby strengthening the mental/neural connections between those contextual cues and their associated IWMs. In turn, each IWM has particular habitual internal responses (e.g., feelings, thoughts, motivations, and bodily sensations) that are mentally/neurally associated with it. For example, a certain IWM of God (e.g., a particular God representation) will have certain feelings, thoughts, motivations, and bodily sensations that are evoked whenever that IWM of God is activated, thereby strengthening the mental/neural connections between the IWM and its associated habitual internal responses. Taken together, in a given time and situation, the currently activated mental/neural representations (IWMs) of self, others, and God will interact bidirectionally with each other, with their respectively associated habitual internal responses, and with their associated contextual cues. This complex and bidirectional interaction will lead to the manifestation of a habitual pattern of behavior—what can be called *behavioral signatures of relational spirituality* (*if... then...* situation–behavior profiles such that “If X and Y, then I will behave in Z manner, but if A and B, then I will behave in C manner.”; Davis et al., 2013; Moriarty & Davis, 2012; cf. Coan, 2016; Mischel & Shoda, 2008; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b; Wood et al., 2014). See Figure 4 for a depiction of this process.

To illustrate, “Juan” is a single, Latino, college student who is highly spiritually oriented and self-identifies as a Catholic Christian. In high school, he experienced a series of difficult interpersonal losses (e.g., his parents separated and divorced, he moved to a different school than all his friends, and both his maternal grandparents passed away), and since then Juan has experienced persistent depressive symptoms. For many years, these depressive symptoms have been most pronounced in contexts in which Juan is by himself, such as when he is alone at home or work (external contextual cues). Within those contexts, Juan has developed a well-ingrained tendency to feel sad and have self-loathing thoughts (internal contextual cues). Based on consistent pairings over several years, these internal and external contextual cues routinely activate self-denigrating mental/neural representations and experiential representations in which God feels distant and inaccessible (activated mental/neural representations). Also, based on consistent pairings over time, those activated mental/neural representations are associated with feelings of sadness and loneliness, thoughts of hopelessness and despair, and physical sensations of heaviness and emptiness (associated habitual internal responses). Thus, whenever Juan is in contexts in which he is alone, all these contextual cues and internal experiences interact with each other in a negatively valenced cycle, contributing to a habitual behavior pattern in which Juan withdraws socially from others and from God (Behavioral Signature of Relational Spirituality 1; Davis et al., 2013; Moriarty & Davis, 2012; cf. Mischel & Shoda, 2008).

In stark contrast, Juan has developed a very different pattern whenever he is in a religious service or gathering with his fellow believers and close friends (external contextual cues). Specifically, since high school, Juan’s friends through church have consistently been his closest friends and his primary attachment figures, and religious services and gatherings have been the one context in which Juan’s depressive symptoms tend to remit temporarily. Whenever he is in

that context, Juan has developed a well-ingrained tendency to feel happy and supported and to have contented thoughts (internal contextual cues). Based on consistent pairings over several years, these internal and external contextual cues routinely activate doctrinal and experiential representations that God is loving and responsive (activated mental/neural representations). Also, based on consistent pairings over time, those activated mental/neural representations are associated with feelings of happiness and love, thoughts of hope and contentment, and physical sensations of vitality and pleasure. Thus, whenever Juan is in religious services and gatherings with his fellow believers and friends, all these contextual cues and internal experiences interact with each other in a positively valenced cycle, contributing to a habitual behavior pattern of relating vibrantly to God and others within that context (Behavioral Signature of Relational Spirituality 2; Davis et al., 2013; Moriarty & Davis, 2012). Consequently, Juan attends several religious services and gatherings per week, in order to have brief periods of relief from the persistent emotional difficulties he experiences elsewhere.

As this example illustrates, theistic believers may have multiple God representations, although some may be more readily and consistently activated than others. Each believer likely has a few God representations that are especially likely to be activated, given how frequently those representations have been activated in the past and how many contextual cues those representations are associated with, based on previously learned pairings (Davis et al., 2013; cf. Baldwin et al., 1996; Collins et al., 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Sharp et al., 2017).

### **Healthy and Unhealthy Theistic Relational Spirituality**

In view of the aforementioned distinctions and complexities, what makes for a healthy spirituality in general and a healthy theistic relational spirituality in particular? And how might these healthy spiritualities be distinguished from their less healthy forms?

### Healthy Theistic Relational Spirituality

Pargament (2007, 2013) has argued that a healthy spirituality is characterized by a high degree of integration among its ingredients, whereas an unhealthy spirituality is characterized by a low degree of integration among its ingredients. He has elaborated:

*A well-integrated spirituality* is not defined by a specific belief, practice, emotion, or relationship, but rather by *the degree to which the various spiritual ingredients work together in synchrony*. Thus, we can imagine a variety of effective spiritualities. What they share is a *high degree of integration*, marked by breadth and depth, responsiveness to life situations, flexibility and continuity, and a concept of the sacred that is large enough to encompass the full range of human potential and luminous enough to provide the individual with a powerful guiding vision. At lower levels of integration, spirituality is characterized by a lack of breadth and depth, an insensitivity to life demands, rigidity or instability, and concepts of the sacred that misdirect the individual in the pursuit of spiritual value. (Pargament, 2013, p. 267, emphasis added; cf. Zinnbauer, 2013)

Indeed, as suggested in the IPNB framework adopted herein, *integration* (i.e., “the linkage of differentiated elements,” Siegel, 2012a, p. 464) may be a fundamental mechanism and indicator of all forms of health/well-being (mental, physical, social, and spiritual; Siegel, 2012a, 2012b).<sup>4</sup> Further, besides Pargament (2013), several other spirituality scholars (e.g., Washburn, 1999; Wilber, 2000) have highlighted the central role of integration in marking a healthy spirituality.

Building on Pargament’s (2013) conceptualization of a healthy spirituality, we propose a *healthy theistic relational spirituality* is a relatively stable state of being in which a monotheistic believer’s doctrinal and experiential representations of God are well-integrated, contextually adaptive across time and situations, and aligned with their behaviors. Stated differently, a

healthy theistic relational spirituality is characterized by a consistently high degree of contextually adaptive doctrinal–experiential congruence. Next, we unpack this definition further.

First, the term *contextually adaptive* implies the theistic believer’s representations (a) help meet a range of challenges that arise in the believer’s life (cf. Dodge et al., 2012) and (b) are associated with numerous indicators of health/well-being within the context of the believer’s culture (sociocultural context) and life (situational context; cf. MacDonald, 2017, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2015). Second, the term *doctrinal–experiential congruence* implies there is coherence and correspondence between the believer’s doctrinal and experiential representations of God. Lastly, the term *consistently* implies the believer exhibits representational similarity and coherence across time and situations (cf. Granqvist, 2014; Watts & Dumbreck, 2013; Zahl & Gibson, 2012). Of note, Granqvist and Main (2017) have operationalized religious attachment security similarly in the scoring and classification system they developed for their Religious Attachment Interview, where religious attachment security is evidenced through a coherent (i.e., semantic–episodic consistency) *and* benevolent representation of God in relation to the self.

It is noteworthy that doctrinal–experiential congruence sometimes is *not* contextually adaptive. To give a general example, a theistic believer may tend to view God conceptually as frightening rather than benevolent (doctrinal representations) and to experience God personally as frightening too (experiential representations). However, this doctrinal–experiential congruence presumably is (a) unable to help this believer meet challenges that arise in his or her life (e.g., the believer is unable to turn to God and religion for comfort and security) and (b) associated with low health/well-being within the context of this believer’s life (e.g., fear, distress) and culture (e.g., in monotheistic faiths, God is usually viewed as a benevolent figure who is a source of comfort/security; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Richards & Bergin, 2005).



By extension, a healthy theistic relational spirituality involves harmonious synchrony among believers' adaptive doctrinal representations of God, experiential representations of God, and behavioral (or procedural) expressions of those doctrinal and experiential representations. That is, healthy theistic relational spirituality involves contextually adaptive doctrinal–experiential congruence and behavioral expressions of that congruence. For a believer with a healthy theistic relational spirituality, all three aspects—“head” (doctrinal representations), “heart” (experiential representations), and “hands” (behavioral expressions)—are well-integrated and working in harmonious synchrony (cf. Hollinger, 2005; Pargament, 2007; Zinnbauer, 2013).

To illustrate, “Omar” is a married, Arabic, middle-aged man who is a Sunni Muslim and a committed member of his mosque. He was raised in a highly devout Muslim family and has practiced his religion since childhood. Omar not only has a long history of informal religious education through his family-of-origin and religious community, but he also obtained formal religious education, through undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Islamic Studies at two prestigious universities. Although Omar has theologically sophisticated and conceptually nuanced doctrinal representations of Allah, his faith is also deeply experiential. He has a lifelong history of recurrent positively valenced experiences in perceived relationship with Allah. That is, since childhood Omar has routinely had personally and emotionally meaningful experiences relating with Allah benevolently through prayer, worship, and nature. He has a rich, intimate experiential relationship with Allah, characterized by consistently positively valenced feelings, thoughts, motivations, and bodily sensations. Indeed, the IWMs that characterize his experiential relationship with Allah correspond to the IWMs that have consistently characterized his relationships with his parents, peers, and spouse. Moreover, Omar is strongly committed to demonstrating his faith through altruistic service. He often teaches classes for Muslim youth in

his mosque, volunteers at a local homeless shelter, and mentors at-risk youth in his community.

In sum, Omar has a faith in which his doctrinal representations, experiential representations, and behavioral expressions routinely work together in harmonious synchrony. Stated differently, his relational spirituality is well-integrated and contextually adaptive. His religion is a potent source of health and well-being for him, reliably helping him meet a range of challenges in his life.

### **Unhealthy Theistic Relational Spirituality**

In contrast, an unhealthy theistic relational spirituality is usually marked by significant fragmentation, incoherence, or disintegration (Pargament, 2007, 2013; cf. Granqvist & Main's [2017] insecure taxonomies). This view is consistent with an IPNB perspective, which posits that impaired integration underlies all forms of "un-health and disease" (Siegel, 2012a, p. 337). Perhaps most commonly, an unhealthy theistic relational spirituality is marked by significant incongruence between a theistic believer's doctrinal and experiential representations of God. For example, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim believers often hold the conceptual view that God/Allah is loving, caring, and forgiving. Even so, many of these believers have consistent difficulty *experiencing* God/Allah in those ways, particularly whenever they are experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, shame, or guilt. Often this lack of doctrinal–experiential congruence is based on recurring negative relational experiences they had earlier in life, such as with caregivers during childhood or with members of their religious group (Granqvist, 2014; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Moriarty & Davis, 2012; Watts & Dumbreck, 2013).

To illustrate, "Rachel" is an Orthodox Jewish woman who is highly committed to her Jewish faith. From an early age, she has had complex representations of God. Although she has conceptually *believed* God is loving, caring, and forgiving, she has consistently struggled to *experience* God in those ways. In particular, whenever she does not live up to her high religious

standards, she feels intensely ashamed and guilty. At such times, she experiences God as being angry with her, punitively withdrawing from her, and harshly judging her. These IWMs correspond to the IWMs Rachel developed through her childhood relationships with her parents. Her parents consistently treated her very harshly, often berating and punishing her for not living up to their strict expectations. Thus, over time Rachel came to view and relate with God in the same conflicted ways she had come to view and relate with her parents. Now, many years later, she has well-ingrained negatively valenced experiential representations of God, and these experiential representations correspond closely to the negatively valenced IWMs she has of other people (e.g., she routinely expects others to be angry with her, withdraw punitively from her when she makes a mistake, and judge her harshly).

Yet an unhealthy theistic relational spirituality does not have to be marked by significant fragmentation, incoherence, or disintegration. Instead, it can sometimes be marked by congruent doctrinal and experiential representations that are *not* contextually adaptive. To illustrate with an extreme example, violent religious fundamentalist terrorists may prototypically tend to view God doctrinally as authoritarian (e.g., punitive and wrathful; doctrinal representations), experience God personally as authoritarian (experiential representations), and behave in ways that are aligned with those congruent doctrinal and experiential representations (e.g., commit violent acts that are thought to be theologically justified enactments of God's will). Nonetheless, because this doctrinal–experiential congruence is prototypically associated with hatred, hostility, and prejudice and is expressed behaviorally in the form of religiously motivated violence, such congruence can hardly be described as contextually adaptive (cf. Post, 2007).

**Cultural Considerations Regarding Healthy and Unhealthy Theistic Relational Spirituality**

Before proceeding, it is important to reiterate the tentativeness of the applications and generalizability of this proposed framework outside of Christianity. Most notably, although there is growing empirical evidence linking Muslim and Jewish believers' God representations to their health/well-being (e.g., Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Weissberger, & Exline, 2016; Ghorbani et al., 2014; Rosmarin, Pargament, & Flannelly, 2009; Rosmarin, Pargament, Krumrei et al., 2009; Rosmarin, Pirutinsky et al., 2009), it is less clear whether doctrinal-experiential congruence is a key cause (i.e., mechanism) and/or effect (i.e., outcome) of healthy versus unhealthy Muslim and Jewish religiousness/spirituality. For example, as mentioned previously, Jewish religiousness/spirituality emphasizes religious/spiritual practices (e.g., behaviors and experiences) much more than religious/spiritual beliefs (e.g., doctrinal representations of God; Cohen et al., 2003, 2013). In fact, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Cohon, 1931/2005; Ibn Paquda, 1040/1996), Jewish theologians and religious scholars usually describe Jewish religiousness/spirituality in ways that place little emphasis on what Jews should or should not believe (Cohen et al., 2013; Cohen & Rozin, 2001). Moreover, empirical research suggests that, relative to Orthodox Jews, non-Orthodox Jews (e.g., Conservative or Reform Jews) hold diverse and complex representations of God (Silverman et al., 2016) and are less likely either to believe in God or to believe God is a personal being (Pew Research Center, 2013). Furthermore, for non-Orthodox Jews, their religious/spiritual beliefs (e.g., doctrinal representations) may be neither a salient aspect of their religion/spirituality nor a relevant contributor to their health/well-being, whereas the opposite may be true of Orthodox Jews (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky et al., 2009).

With regard to Islam, although religious/spiritual beliefs and religious/spiritual practices are each recognized dimensions of Muslim religiousness/spirituality (Abu-Raiya, 2013; Abu-

Raiya & Pargament, 2011), Muslims' religious/spiritual life usually centers on their religious/spiritual practices (e.g., the Five Pillars of Islam; Espisito, 1998). Moreover, even though some social scientists and religious scholars have argued that Muslims' personal relationship with Allah is a central aspect of Muslim religiousness/spirituality (e.g., Bonab et al., 2013; Ibn Arabi, 2004; Nasr, 1997), the nature of this divine–human relationship may tend to be quite different from how the divine–human relationship is usually understood and experienced in the Christian tradition (Glaser, 1986; Miner et al., 2014). For example, Glaser (1986) explained:

[For Muslims,] the relationship [between Allah and themselves is] more like that between potentate and subject than that between father and [child].... Closeness between man and God is [understood more] in terms of knowledge rather than [mutuality], and the ultimate in [this] relationship is willing submission rather than interaction. (pp. 58-59)

Of note, up to this point, we have mainly focused our discussion of this theistic relational spirituality framework on its applications at an individual level of analysis (e.g., how individuals are affected mentally/neurally by their relational experiences). However, it is important to acknowledge broader, communal-level influences and dynamics, perhaps especially when it comes to the theistic relational spirituality of Jewish and Muslim believers. Judaism and Islam are communally oriented traditions (Cohen & Hill, 2007; Fischer et al., 2010), and consequently, Jewish and Muslim believers' theistic relational spirituality might be more communally influenced (e.g., by their faith community and by the broader Jewish or Muslim community, both locally and globally), relative to Christian believers' theistic relational spirituality. Moreover, Jewish and Muslim believers often live in societies in which they face significant discrimination because of their faith (Pew Research Center, 2012, 2013, 2017), and these experiences and perceptions can influence the development and dynamics of their theistic relational spirituality.

To illustrate with one of the aforementioned examples, let us suppose that Omar (the Sunni Muslim man with a healthy theistic relational spirituality) started a new job and began facing recurrent anti-Muslim microaggressions in his workplace. Because of these discriminatory experiences, he might understandably begin to experience significant distress or impairment in his occupational functioning. In such a situation, even if Omar developed a mental health difficulty (e.g., mild depression), his theistic relational spirituality could still be described as healthy, if his doctrinal and experiential representations of Allah were still well-integrated, aligned with his behaviors, and considered contextually adaptive within the context of his culture (sociocultural context) and life (situational context). However, if Omar's experiences were so severe (e.g., traumatic) and/or his mental health difficulties caused significant impairment in his religiousness/spirituality (cf. Hathaway, 2003), then his current theistic relational spirituality might not fit what we have described as healthy theistic relational spirituality. Nonetheless, given his surrounding context, it would be culturally and clinically insensitive (as well as actively misleading) to simply describe his theistic relational spirituality as unhealthy without emphasizing the substantial contribution of these contextual factors, as though the difficulties in his theistic relational spirituality merely reflected his own individual problem.

### **Adaptive Transformation of Theistic Relational Spirituality**

Across monotheistic religious traditions, there are numerous ways believers can experience adaptive transformation of their doctrinal and experiential representations of God. Again, an IPNB perspective posits that adaptive transformation of people's mind/brain typically occurs within the context of their relationships (Cozolino, 2017; Siegel, 2010, 2012a, 2012b). Building on the aforementioned discussion of how doctrinal representations are developed, adaptive transformation in doctrinal representations of God (e.g., from frightening to benevolent)

perhaps most typically occurs through new socialization and social learning experiences (e.g., via information and modeling from caregivers, teachers, friends, romantic partners, peers, fellow believers, religious leaders, and cultural leaders) or through new educational experiences (e.g., via explicit instruction either from religious or “secular” literature, education, and media; Granqvist, 2014; Granqvist & Nkara, 2017; Rizzuto, 1979; cf. Richert & Granqvist, 2013).<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, building on the aforementioned discussion of how experiential representations are developed, adaptive transformation in experiential representations of God (including increased contextually adaptive doctrinal–experiential congruence) most typically occurs through (a) reparative experiences in human relationships (e.g., with close others, with members of one’s faith community, or within the context of spiritual or psychological intervention) or (b) reparative experiences in perceived relationship with God (e.g., in prayer, rituals, etc.; Granqvist, 2014; Moriarty & Davis, 2012). Several studies have shown that one way to foster adaptive transformation in experiential representations of God is participation in spiritual or psychological intervention, such as spiritual direction, pastoral counseling, or spiritually integrated psychotherapy (Pargament, 2007). For instance, Tisdale et al. (1997) demonstrated that participating in multimodal spiritually oriented intervention (which included pharmacotherapy, spiritual psychoeducation, and both individual and group psychotherapy) is effective in promoting increased self-esteem and contextually adaptive doctrinal–experiential congruence. Moriarty and Davis (2012) hypothesized that one change mechanism in this psychotherapeutic process may be that theistic believers come to develop *security-based self-representations* (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004), which are IWMs of self that are derived from the internalization of security-enhancing interactions with attachment figures (e.g., psychotherapist, spouse, God, etc.). These IWMs become integrated into one’s mental/neural hierarchy of IWMs and attachment

patterns. Although they are integrated with one's representations and experiences of oneself, these security-based self-representations remain inherently relational, both in terms of their origins and in terms of how they are mentally/neurally activated and experientially revised.

To illustrate with one of the aforementioned fictitious examples, Juan (the man who experiences persistent depressive symptoms except when in a religious service or gathering) might experience adaptive transformation of his experiential representations of God if he participates in a similar type of multimodal spiritually oriented intervention. For example, taking antidepressant medication might help improve Juan's emotional functioning. Spiritual psychoeducation might help educate Juan about how his mental, spiritual, physical, and social experiences are intimately interconnected. Individual and group psychotherapy might help Juan (a) resolve the grief related to the interpersonal losses he experienced earlier in life, (b) develop better coping and social skills, and (c) have reparative experiences in relationships with his psychotherapists and fellow group members (e.g., experience adaptive transformation of his IWMs of self, others, and God, ideally leading to increased self-esteem and contextually adaptive doctrinal-experiential congruence, as well as the development of security-based self-representations; Moriarty & Davis, 2012; Tisdale et al., 1997). Through participating in this multimodal, potentially long-term spiritually oriented intervention, Juan might experience adaptive transformation in his experiential representations of God, as well as in his psychological and interpersonal functioning more generally (cf. Cozolino, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Similar to Tisdale et al. (1997), Cheston, Piedmont, Eanes, and Lavin (2003) found evidence that participating in general psychotherapy (e.g., psychotherapy that is not necessarily spiritually integrated) can be effective in fostering adaptive relational-spiritual transformation as well. To illustrate with another of the aforementioned fictitious examples, Rachel (the Orthodox



Jewish woman who consistently struggled to experience God as loving, caring, and forgiving) might experience adaptive transformation of her experiential representations of God if she participates in effective long-term psychotherapy. Psychotherapy could help her work through the pain, hurt, and distress she experienced in her family of origin, based on how her parents treated her. It could also offer her a corrective emotional experience in her relationship with her psychotherapist. Her psychotherapist could provide Rachel with a transformative experience of someone who is consistently empathic and caring toward her, emotionally available and forgiving with her (even when she makes mistakes), and reliably encouraging and empowering of her. In so doing, Rachel will hopefully experience adaptive transformation in her IWMs of herself and others. Over time, these transformed IWMs might generalize to her other relationships, including her perceived relationship with God. In so doing, Rachel can experience increased contextually adaptive congruence between her already positively valenced doctrinal representations of God and her increasingly positively valenced experiential representations of God (Moriarty & Davis, 2012; cf. Cozolino, 2017; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004, 2016).

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

In sum, we have presented a model of theistic relational spirituality that synthesizes convergent theory and research on attachment, social cognition, and IPNB. We highlighted doctrinal and experiential representations of God as two key dimensions underlying theistic relational spirituality, identifying these representations as the two mental/neural “train tracks” underlying how monotheistic believers conceptually view and experientially relate with God. We delineated how these representations develop, arguing that theistic believers develop doctrinal representations of God mainly through socialization, social learning, and educational experiences, and they develop experiential representations of God mainly through experiences in

relationship with other humans and in perceived relationship with God. We described how theistic believers' doctrinal and experiential representations of God are shaped heavily by contextual influences, including internal contextual cues (e.g., current feelings, thoughts, motivations, and bodily sensations) and external contextual cues (e.g., features of the broader sociocultural context and the immediate situational context; Davis et al., 2013).

By extension, this understanding of God representations allows us to discuss what constitutes a healthy theistic relational spirituality. A healthy theistic relational spirituality is characterized by highly integrated (i.e., congruent and coherent) doctrinal and experiential representations of God that are (a) contextually adaptive (i.e., able to help meet one's challenges and associated with culturally valued and situationally appropriate indicators of health/well-being), (b) consistent across time and situations, and (c) aligned with the believer's behaviors.

Theistic believers often exhibit significant incongruence between their doctrinal and experiential representations of God. Even so, there are a variety of ways theistic believers can experience adaptive transformation in these representations. For example, they can experience adaptive transformation in their experiential representations of God through reparative experiences in human relationships (e.g., with a psychotherapist, romantic partner, friend, etc.) or in perceived relationship with God (Moriarty & Davis, 2012; Watts & Dumbreck, 2013).

Regarding future directions, in recent decades, scientific knowledge of relational spirituality has advanced greatly (Davis et al., 2016), yet countless research questions remain. For instance, returning to the integrative framework of IPNB's triangle of human experience, it may be clear to the reader that we have not differentiated much between the "mind" and "brain" but instead have referred collectively to the "mental/neural" features underlying the structure and function of God representations. This fact is largely because, with only a few notable exceptions

(e.g., Schjoedt, Stødkilde-Jørgense, Geertz, & Roepstorff, 2009), there is a dearth of relational spirituality research investigating “the brain” (e.g., the neural structures and functions underlying what people’s God representations are and how they operate). Thus, when we refer to doctrinal and experiential representations of God, as well as to their role in healthy spirituality, we must recognize that current scientific knowledge of relational spirituality is quite limited to investigating two sides of the IPNB triangle (relationships and the mind) rather than all three (relationships, mind, and brain). Therefore, future research on relational spirituality might incorporate studies of the brain when possible. Doing so may even help address measurement problems that have historically plagued relational spirituality research, such as over-reliance on self-report measures (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Sharp et al, 2018; Zahl et al., 2013).

There also is a need for research on whether certain elements of theistic relational spirituality (e.g., beliefs, experiences, behaviors, or doctrinal–experiential congruence) impact believers’ health/well-being differentially, based on the believer’s faith tradition. For example, for believers from theistic traditions that place a strong emphasis on orthopraxy (e.g., Judaism, Islam), the behavioral components of their relational spirituality (e.g., frequency of prayer, rituals, etc.) may have the strongest impact on their health/well-being, particularly relative to their beliefs (e.g., doctrinal representations of God) or doctrinal–experiential congruence. In comparison, because the Christian tradition tends to place such a high emphasis on orthodoxy and on cultivating a doctrinally and experientially congruent personal relationship with a benevolent, experience-near God, it may be that Christian believers exhibit more robust interconnections among their doctrinal representations of God, experiential representations of God, doctrinal–experiential congruence, and health/well-being, relative to Jews or Muslims.

Another promising direction for future research is to expand the breadth of populations studied. Most relational spirituality research has been conducted with predominantly Christian samples from the U.S. or Europe. Future research should address how applicable the theory and empirical findings reviewed in this paper are to people outside the U.S. and Europe, people outside Christianity, and people outside monotheistic traditions (e.g., polytheists; pantheists). Similarly, researchers could examine whether there are differences in the relative frequencies of certain types of God representations (e.g., authoritative, benevolent, critical, or distant; Froese & Bader, 2010), based on faith tradition, culture, nationality, or acculturation level.

Relatedly, researchers can enhance understanding of important within-religion differences in theistic relational spirituality. For instance, within the U.S., Christian believers from the following subtraditions are most apt to believe in a personal God: Mormons (89%), evangelical Protestants (80%), Jehovah's Witness (77%), and Protestants from historically Black churches (70%; Pew Research Center, 2015). Such a belief is less likely among Catholic (61%), Orthodox (61%), and mainline Protestant Christians (63%). Hence, researchers could explore whether believers from these respective groups differ in terms of the content and psychological functions of their theistic relational spirituality, including how interconnected their doctrinal and experiential God representations tend to be with each other, with their general health/well-being, and with their health/well-being in various subdomains of life (e.g., mental, physical, and social).

Researchers and practitioners also could collaborate with one another to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of spiritual and psychological interventions that draw on the theistic relational spirituality framework we have described. It will be vital for such interventions to be developed and tested in ways that take into account the cultural considerations we outlined. Moreover, in clinical practice and outcome research, it of course will be important for clinicians

and researchers to select measures carefully, considering the cultural appropriateness and validation evidence of those measures and measuring doctrinal God representations, experiential God representations, and doctrinal–experiential congruence as precisely as possible (Abu-Raiya & Hill, 2014; Rosmarin, Pargament, Krumrei et al., 2009; Sharp et al., 2018).

Indeed, there are vast horizons for relational spirituality researchers to explore. We eagerly await what emerges from this fascinating area of research, and we look forward to seeing how practitioners apply pertinent findings to help people better grow and flourish in their lives.

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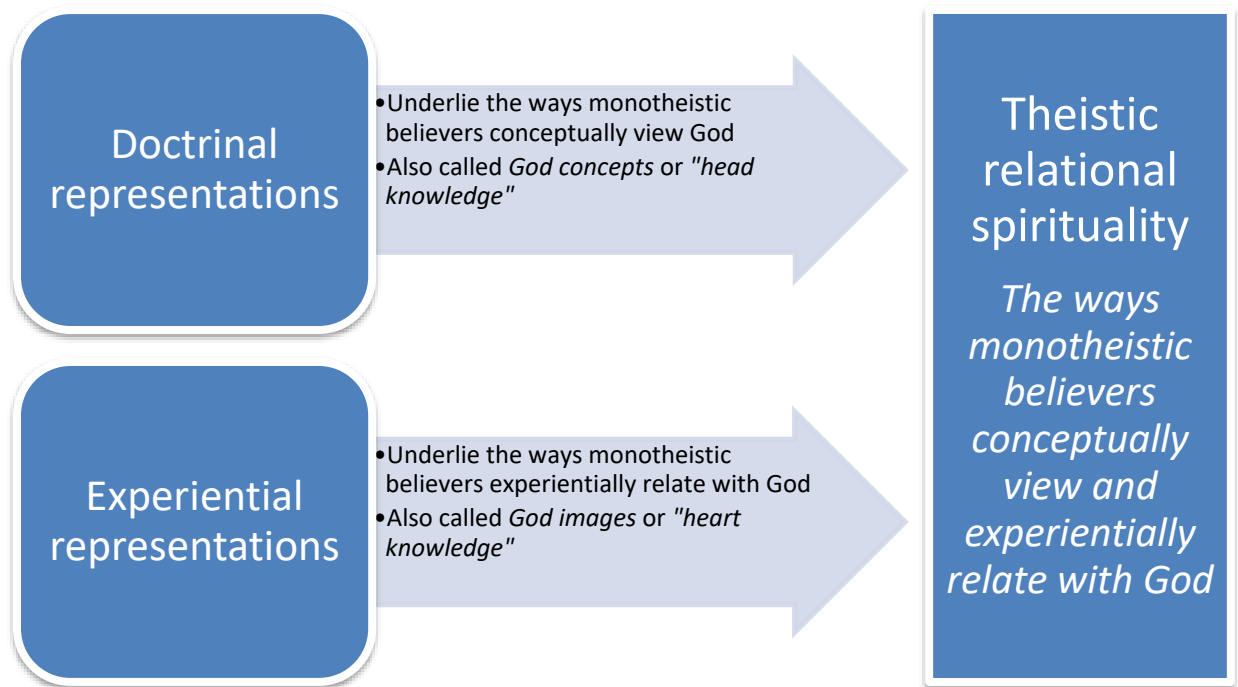
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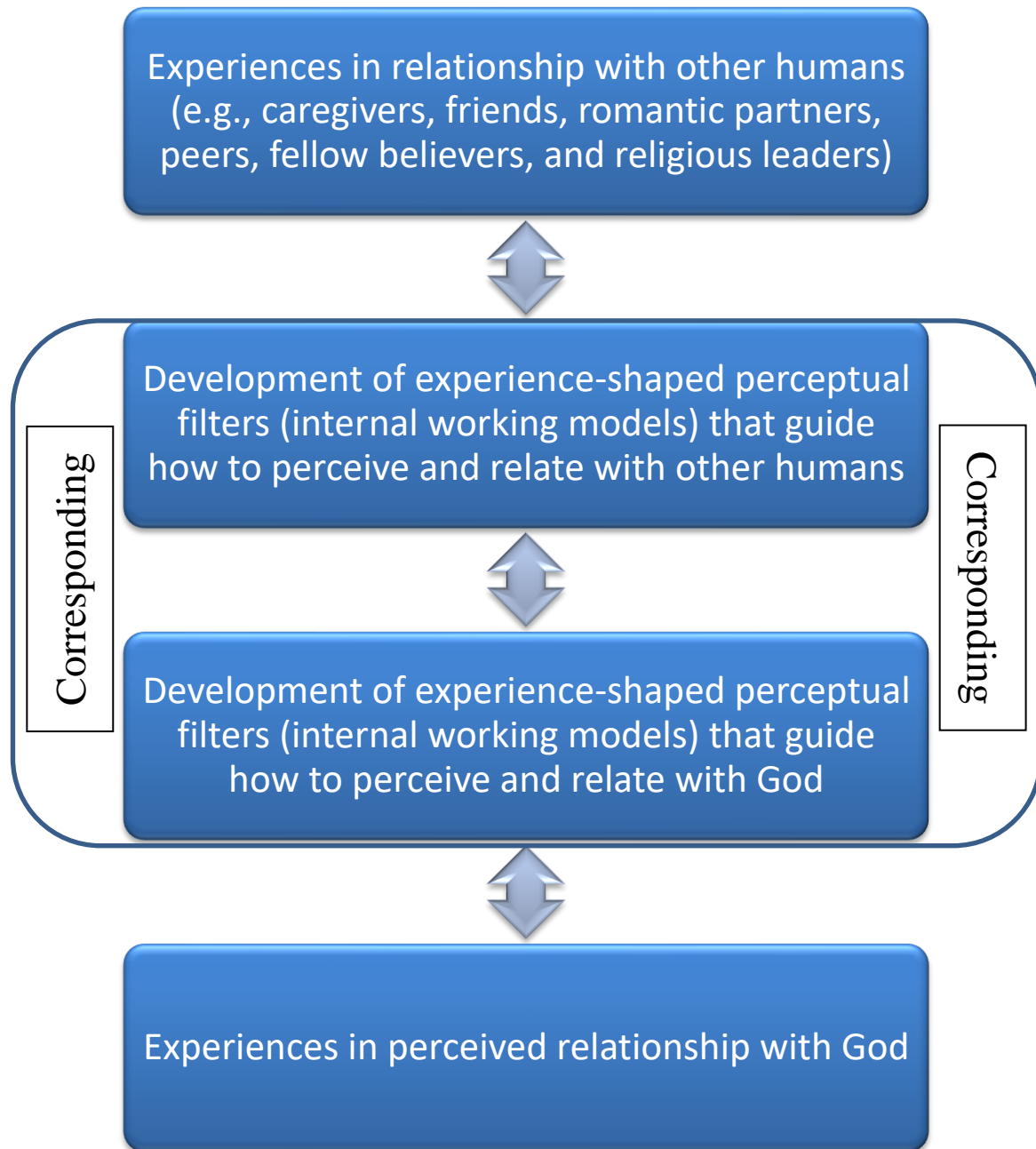
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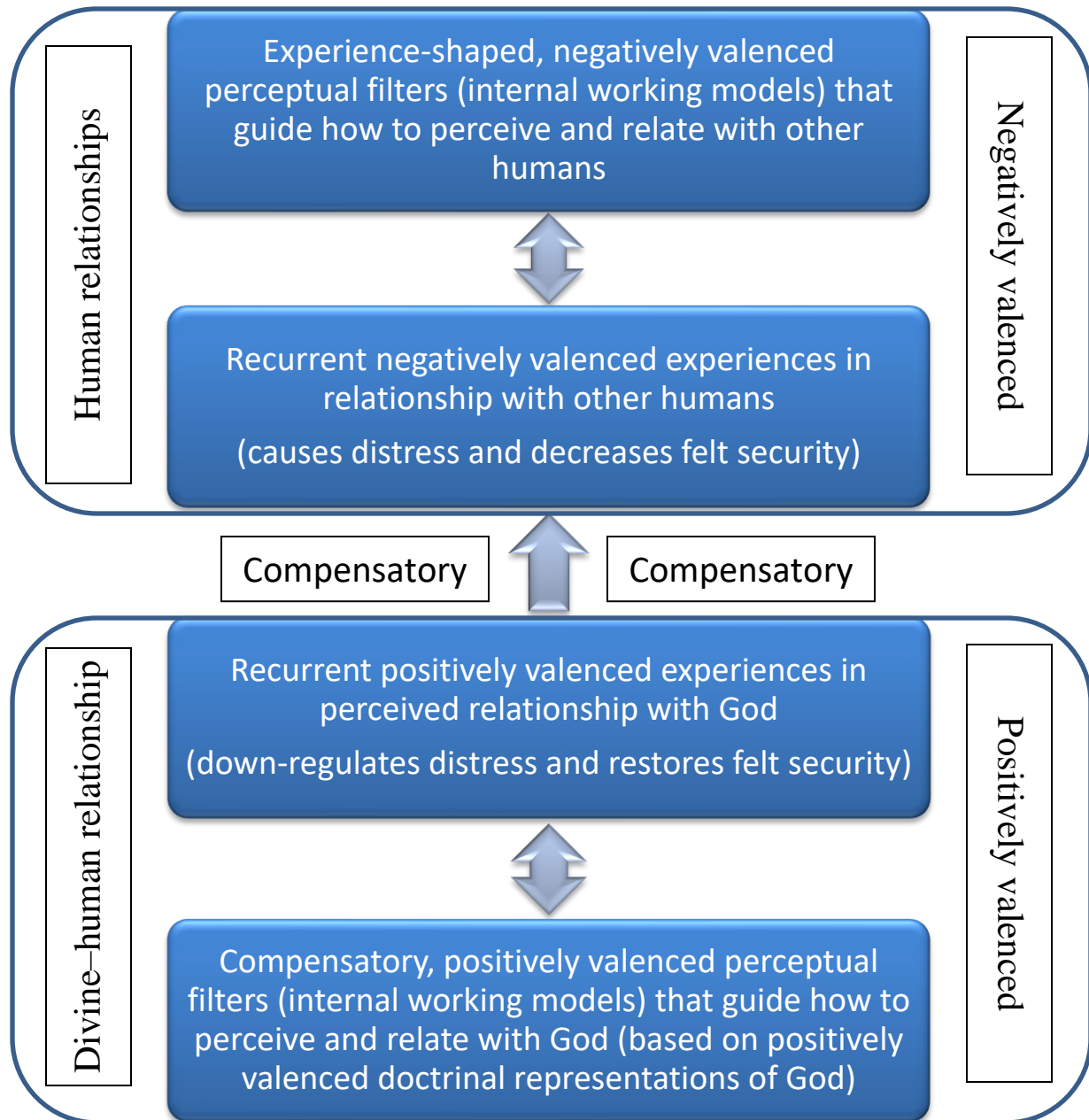


*Figure 1.* Doctrinal and experiential representations of God: The two main mental/neural “train tracks” of theistic relational spirituality (Davis et al., 2013, 2016; Rizzuto, 1979; Watts & Dumbreck, 2013; Zahl & Gibson, 2012; Zahl et al., 2013).

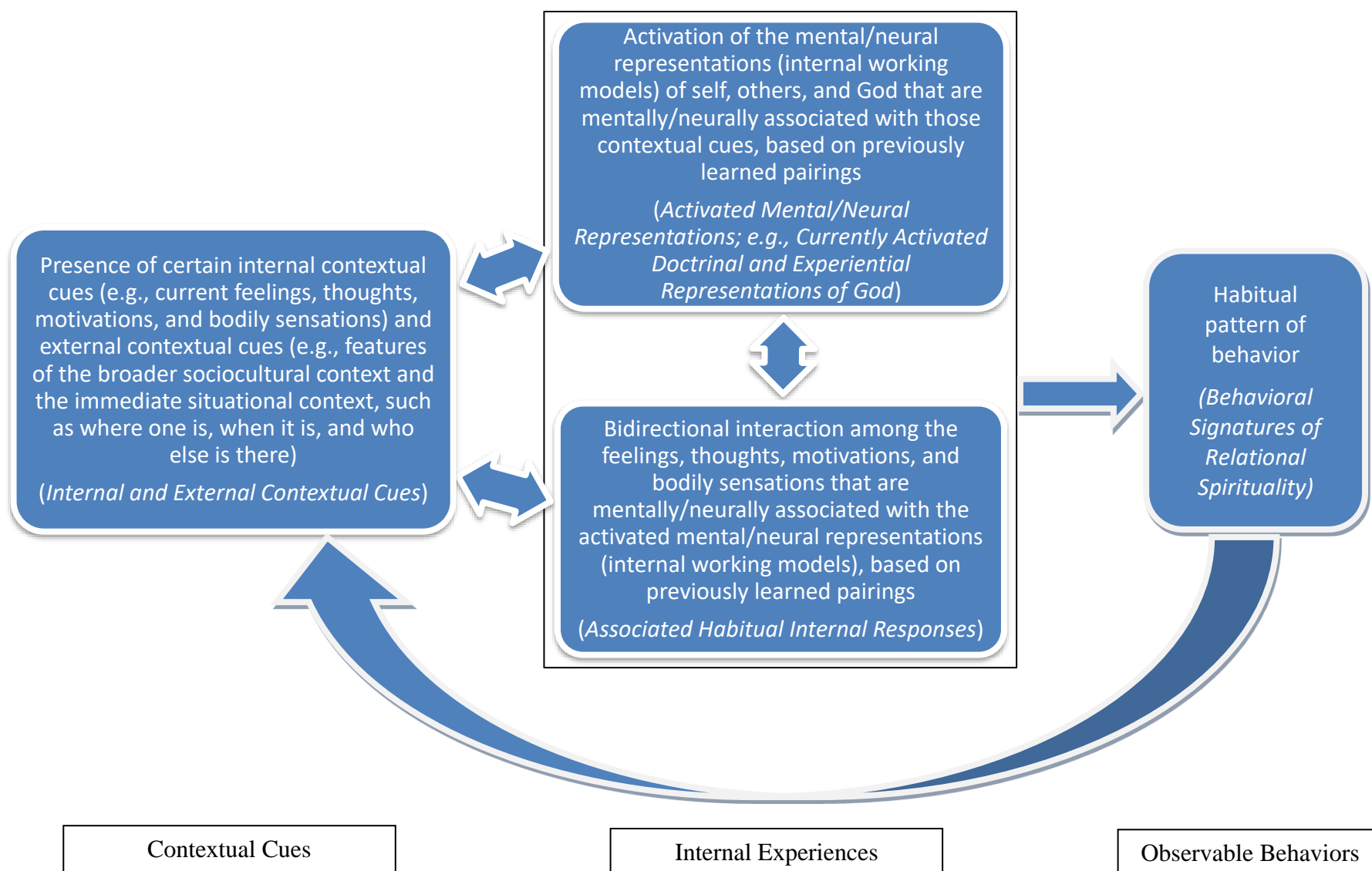


*Figure 2.* The development of experiential representations of God: The internal-working-model correspondence hypothesis (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005). According to this hypothesis, theistic believers develop corresponding experience-based perceptual filters (internal working models) that guide both how they perceive and relate with other people and how they perceive and relate with God. These corresponding internal working models develop and change via the individual's (a) experiences in relationship with other humans and (b) experiences in perceived relationship with God (Davis et al., 2013; Granqvist, 2014; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Hall & Fujikawa, 2013; Hall et al., 2009; Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992; Moriarty & Davis, 2012).





*Figure 3.* The development of experiential representations of God: The compensation hypothesis (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005). According to this hypothesis, theistic believers with a history of recurrent negatively valenced relationships with humans develop compensatory perceptual filters (internal working models) that routinely (a) guide how they perceive and relate with God and (b) help down-regulate the distress they experience in human relationships (thereby helping restore a sense of internal calmness and confidence). These compensatory perceptual filters are based on positively valenced doctrinal representations of God (e.g., theological beliefs God is safe, loving, available, responsive, and caring; Davis et al., 2013; Granqvist, 2014; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013, 2016; Hall & Fujikawa, 2013; Hall et al., 2009; Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, 1992; Moriarty & Davis, 2012).



*Figure 4.* Dynamics of theistic relational spirituality: How contextual cues influence the internal experiences and observable behaviors of theistic relational spirituality (Davis et al., 2013; cf. Coan, 2016; Mischel & Shoda, 2008; Wood et al., 2014).

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In using the word “theistic” throughout this paper, we (like other scholars; e.g., Bartz, 2009; Richards & Bergin, 2005) are referring specifically to *monotheistic* religious systems (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Judaism), which are each based on the belief in one God—a Supreme Being who created the universe, earth, and humans. Such systems are traditionally contrasted with Eastern religious systems (which are often based on belief in polytheism or pantheism) and scientific naturalistic systems (which are often based on the belief there are no supernatural agents/forces; instead, natural forces created and maintain the world; Richards & Bergin, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In using the word “doctrinal” throughout this paper, we (like other God representation scholars; e.g., Zahl & Gibson, 2012; Zahl et al., 2013) are referring specifically to a *category of belief* rather than to any specific *content* of religious teaching/doctrine per se.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, as is typical in the psychology of religion literature (e.g., Davis et al., 2016; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016), we use the word “perceived” to describe people’s relationship with God. Such an approach is admittedly limited in that it makes no claims about people’s *actual* relationship or interactions with God, as a theistic approach to psychology might (e.g., Richards & Bergin, 2005). Instead, the ideas presented herein depart from a materialistic and psychological approach to the mind/brain. Thus, our approach is one of methodological reductionism, in which we leave out the question of the metaphysical veracity of God and of R/S experiences in actual interaction with God. In so doing, we do not mean to imply any form of ontological reduction regarding God. We merely adopt the same stance Rizzuto (1979) adopted in her seminal work *The Birth of the Living God*, where she wrote: “Questions about the actual existence of God do not pertain here.... Those among my patients who believe are unshakable in their conviction that God is a very live person. To understand them I must accept that belief as reality to them. Any other point of view would do violence to the phenomenon studied. But as a researcher I will not make pronouncements appropriate for philosophers and theologians. My only obligation is to respect the phenomenon and its pristine manifestations” (p. 4).

<sup>4</sup> It is notable that spiritual health/well-being and psychological health/well-being are related yet distinct constructs. People’s level of spiritual health/well-being is often quite linked to their concurrent level of psychological health/well-being (MacDonald, 2017, 2018). Nonetheless, even when people’s psychological health/well-being is less than optimal (e.g., they are presently experiencing a mental disorder), they can still experience a measure of spiritual health/well-being. In fact, a believer with a relatively healthy theistic relational spirituality might harness their relational spirituality to cultivate better psychological health/well-being (Pargament, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> However, the extent to which transformation of one’s doctrinal representations occurs is likely to be constrained by the quality of one’s relationships with the “socialization agent” or model. For example, trustworthiness and responsiveness on behalf of a teacher or friend should facilitate adaptive transformation, whereas untrustworthiness and insensitivity should undermine such transformation. Furthermore, reparative relationship experiences may well transform not only a theistic believer’s experiential representations of God but also by extension their doctrinal representations of God; for instance, positive *experiences* of love should also cultivate positive *beliefs* about love (cf. Granqvist & Hagekull, 2003). After all, doctrinal and experiential representations are typically not entirely orthogonal but instead are often inter-related, perhaps especially when experiential representations are in the midst of a positively valenced trajectory of transformation. In any event, the transformation of believers’ doctrinal representations of God presumably is largely socially mediated, even as the development of doctrinal representations is.